

Front Ensemble.



FLEUR WINTER PERCUSSION
2025

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the Front Ensemble! The Front Ensemble or “Pit” is the newest section to the marching arts. Originally the only mallet instruments allowed to be marched were timpani in 1972, glockenspiels, and xylophones in 1974. In 1977, marimbas and vibraphones were allowed to be used, but they still had to be marched. Overtime, people began to realize the physical strain of carrying these large, awkward instruments, and they were allowed to be grounded in 1978. This allowed extended techniques and higher quality instruments (like pedal timpani and 4-octave marimbas) to be used. 1982 was the last year marching mallet instruments were used in competition. Now it was not uncommon to see an assortment of instruments previously only used in other genres such as drum set, congas, bongos, and various types of mounted cymbals. Due to the advent of stationary percussion, marching cymbal parts are now commonly written into the front ensemble parts.

The use of electronic instruments in marching bands is controversial and divisive within the marching band community, and was prohibited outright by [Drum Corps International](#)(DCI) until 2008, when it was passed in an 11-4 vote. Now although the Front is somewhat new to the marching scene, it has made its mark by allowing technical and intricate musical phrases that can not be accomplished by most instruments marching.



The electrical part of the front ensemble has unquestionably been one of the biggest influences in the marching arts since 2008. To be able to mic instruments and to add sound effects to marching band shows has completely changed how shows are designed. Before microphones, players would have to play around one range of dynamics.. LOUD! Now with microphones on most front ensemble instruments, musicians can play with appropriate touch and a wide range of dynamics. This also promotes care of musicians muscles and nerves in the arm and wrist area. Players who have healthy wrist, play better and longer.



On top of electronics coming into the scene for front ensembles, the call for performance and “musicality” has drastically changed how front ensembles function. I’m literally not joking when you could walk up to a group you don’t even know the name of and with spotting a few defined techniques they use, you could narrow down what side of the spectrum they are from. Groups like Music City Mystique and Groups like RCC are not completely opposite in technique, but if you watch those two groups back to back, you can clearly tell the style and approach is VERY different.

TECHNICAL DIFFERENCES

There is a preconceived idea of “East” and “West” coast approaches which a lot of groups pick sides based on personal preference. It can be a good thing which allows a “all in one” approach which helps a group create a look and sound they are looking for. On the bad side of looking at it, it will limit the performer to one style and they can end up not knowing the different styles of technique and musicality can badly affect the player down the road after their marching career.



TECHNIQUE

Technique is always the foundation to everything you will do. You wouldn't be able to walk, eat, even breathe if it wasn't for your body learning and developing those traits at birth. The biggest difference with musical technique is that you must teach your body how to do these things through a constant trial and error system. The best musician you can think of will always have a foundation of crucial technical ideas they can reference in their music, you don't see professional basketball players just showing up to the game and being able to win. They practice CONSISTENTLY to keep and improve their skills so they can stay the best.

EXPECTATIONS

Now.. do I expect you to give up everything for technique mastery? Obviously not. I understand along with the rest of highschool and other things your lives will be very busy at times. I do expect you however, to take time out of your lives to live up to the expectations set by the group. Which includes practicing weekly and being prepared coming to rehearsals.

INSTRUMENTS

Vibraphone:

Tuned metal bars, sustain effected by muting bars with a foot pedal.

Glockenspiel:

Small tuned metal bars, high-pitched and used in delicate/primary phrases.

Synthesizer:

Electrically produced sounds, used to broaden the full band's soundscape.

Auxiliary:

A variety of percussive instruments, used to add texture to the ensemble.

Marimba:

Tuned wooden bars, consists of 4 to 5 octaves of bars. Primary Idiophone.

Xylophone:

Small tuned wooden bars, used in sharper articulated/staccato phrases.

Bass Guitar:

Lowest pitched member of the Guitar family. Used to blend Brass line and a low end rhythmic theme.

Timpani:

Low tuned pitch changing drums, used to blend with low brass.

KEYBOARDS

POSTURE

Legs should be shoulder width apart with knees slightly bent. Feet should be angled slightly outward to facilitate lateral movement across the instrument. For most instances, your torso and shoulders will stay parallel with the keyboard. Each keyboard should be at an appropriate playing height. Keep your shoulders square and head up.

Vibraphone: Only your right toes will be on the pedal. This is to ensure that your right foot/heel will be providing balance as you move behind your keyboard with your left foot.

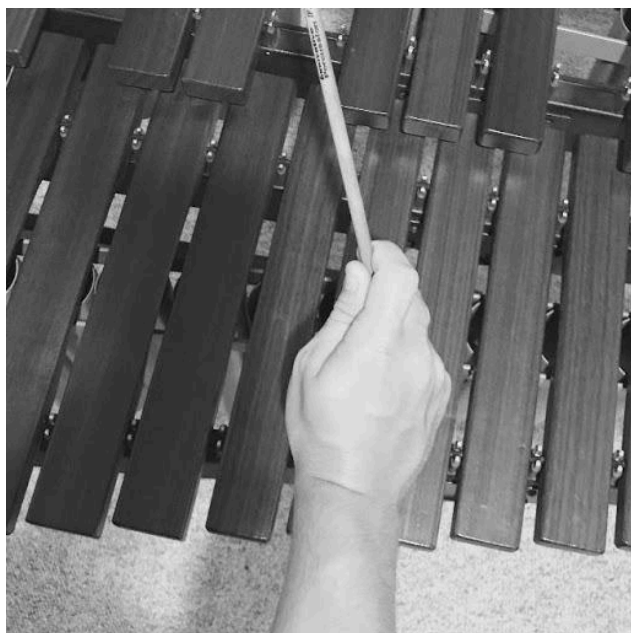
SET POSITION

Mallet heads are aligned equally at full wrist extension above the keyboard. Distance between mallet heads will change depending on the interval to be played. By default, mallet heads should angle in and create an "A" shaped frame that we will maintain as we move around the keyboard. As our note intervals widen, so does the angle. Keep the wrists low and do not use your arm to raise the mallets.

Stay relaxed at all times.

2-MALLET TECHNIQUE - MIDDLE FULCRUM

Divide the mallet shaft into thirds with your eyes. You will place the bottom third in the palm of your hand gripping the mallet with your pinky and ring fingers. Your index finger and thumb should line up directly on the third division of the mallet leaving approximately one inch of the mallet sticking out of the back of your hand. The thumb and index finger should connect with the mallet at your first knuckle. A natural space should occur between the first and second and the thumb and index fingers.



At most tempos we will encounter (with the exception of very brisk tempos) the front and back of your grip should be relatively relaxed. The back should be a tad more stable to create a solid foundation, but the front between the thumb and index finger should be relaxed until very fast tempos. The purpose of middle fulcrum is to do away with having to make a switch in your hands once the tempo is no longer slow enough to effectively use back fulcrum. The middle fulcrum makes use of the weight of your arm just like back fulcrum, with the added benefit of more dexterity and more moderate to brisk tempos as in front fulcrum.

Ninety-five percent of the stroke should come from the wrist so it is important that the technique in the hand is solid. The back fingers should remain closed into the palm and the index finger can be slightly relaxed (but not pointed). The other five percent should come from the arm as an extension of a full wrist stroke. There will be exceptions at times but this will be the standard. A marimba or vibraphone played with mallets does not have rebound so this approach allows us to create our own. Be sure that most of the weight that you feel is in the middle of your grip, not the front or back.

LEGATO STROKE

This is our general stroke and will be used most often within the mallet ensemble. Without overcomplicating things, it's just a relaxed, smooth, and connected stroke. The starting and stopping points of the stroke are the same; the mallet moves straight down to play and straight up to return back to the original playing position. The stroke is relaxed yet precise. The wrist creates a constant full range of motion to generate a natural looking/sounding stroke.

When playing longer rhythms that can't be comfortably connected with one smooth wrist turn (whole notes, half notes, etc.), we utilize an exaggerated legato upstroke such that the hands "float". In the float, the initial down stroke is the same but the recovery is slower on the upstroke, creating a slow-motion movement upwards from the note. The movement is led by the mallet head (not the wrist!) and should feel like you are slowly pulling every bit of sound possible out of the bar. The arm is used at times to create a more fluid look and to generate more sound from the bars in louder passages. Most uses will have either a defined ending beat or continue the motion until the next note. Common mistakes include pushing forward with the mallets, using too much arm, and generally overdoing it. This technique will be used most often in the vibraphones, but will be utilized throughout the ensemble.

SHIFTING

When moving from one note to another, we will use a checkmark type of motion to travel to the next destination. It is important to maintain a legato approach between notes as well as when striking keys. This is very helpful when navigating tricky 4 mallet chords, or playing large intervals across the instrument. The main function of the shift is to get you where you need to be sooner, which then allows you to play more accurately and with a better sound.

4-MALLET GRIP (STEVENS)

The following process is the same for both hands.

First, grip a mallet with your pinky and ring finger. The pinky is our anchor and must wrap all the way around the mallet providing the foundation for the grip. There should be minimal excess mallet protruding from the bottom of your pinky. The outer mallet should go up at about a 45 degree angle in relation to the forearm. This will ensure that the mallets will hang evenly when the inner mallet is added to the grip. There is a delicate balance between gripping too tightly with the pinky and letting your outside mallet droop down.



Second, place the other mallet in the center of the palm of your hand just under your thumb muscle. Everyone's hands are a little different so you may need to experiment somewhat with the exact spot that sticks for you. Your middle finger is wrapped around the mallet, holding it into your palm/thumb muscle with the fingertip. Your index finger now acts as a shelf for the inside mallet, and the mallet should be able to rest without any pressure in your hand. The index finger must always stay out and never curl into your hand at any time. This is probably the biggest foundation of your entire 4-mallet technique.

Finally, place your thumb on the inside mallet directly over the first knuckle of your index finger. The thumb rests on top of the mallet and applies only the minimal amount of pressure to keep it in place. The thumb contacts the mallet with the fleshy part of the thumb, not the tip of the thumb. This will allow you to freely change intervals as well as maintain a relaxed grip. The mallets should naturally set at the interval of a fifth.



4-MALLET STROKE TYPES

DOUBLE VERTICAL STROKE

Set position for the double vertical stroke is for all four mallets to be on an even plane at the top of the stroke. This stroke should be played primarily with the wrist. The thumbs will remain on top of the grip the entire time. Never turn the hand flat as in our 2-mallet grip regardless of difficult intervals. Both mallet heads must remain parallel to the keyboard at all times to eliminate flammings of the mallets. Gradually, we will learn to incorporate the arm into the stroke. The addition of using arm should be a byproduct of a relaxed stroke with correct technique. Do not misinterpret this for using arm to execute the stroke. The mallets should travel straight up and down without any side-to-side motion. Make sure to keep your fingers relaxed and the speed of the stroke fluid and consistent.

SINGLE INDEPENDENT STROKE

Set position for a single independent stroke is for the active mallet to be raised at the top of the stroke and the tacet mallet resting just above the keys. We will primarily be using this stroke type for mallets 2 and 3. The stroke will be achieved by rotating the active mallet around the tacet mallet (i.e. mallet 3 will rotate around mallet 4). In order to develop independence with the inside mallets it is important to keep the outer mallets as still as possible. In order to achieve this the hands must stay relaxed. Relaxed fingers act as shock absorbers whereas tension will cause the outer mallets to twitch vertically or horizontally. Make sure that you keep your index finger and thumb firm, but relaxed. This will help to keep control of the inside mallets. When at set position, the outer mallets should be slightly angled up, not parallel with the keyboard. This should happen naturally.

SINGLE ALTERNATING STROKE

The set position for a single alternating stroke should be with all mallets set on the same plane hovering just above the keys. To create the stroke, one mallet will rotate upward and then back down to strike the bar. As one mallet strikes the bar, the other mallet will raise in response much like a pendulum transferring its momentum. Be sure to not simply rotate the wrist: instead, think of the pivot point as bouncing from one mallet to the next. This will allow us to control the articulation, rhythm, and dynamic of each mallet.

DOUBLE LATERAL STROKE

The standard Double Lateral stroke is most commonly used for the "ripple roll" or "lateral roll" technique. It should not operate like the other 3 stroke types. The goal is to produce two strokes through one hand motion. The set position and playing position are the same as a double vertical stroke. To create the stroke you will rotate down with the one mallet and immediately follow through with the rotation so the other mallet in that hand strikes directly afterwards. The motion of this stroke type is almost impossible to put into words, so please ask questions in person regarding this stroke. It is especially important with this stroke type to stay completely loose and relaxed in the hands.

**All strokes should be executed with a legato approach*

RHYTHM SECTION

DRUM SET

Be able to demonstrate a wide variety of grooves, with special attention paid to more unique styles (drum n bass, modern hip hop, etc.) Tasty grooves are always more impressive than busy chops... keep that in mind. *Ensemble awareness* is the most important thing when auditioning for drum set in this ensemble. You must be able to bury the met, follow the battery and keyboards, and show dynamic sensitivity. Prepare all the exercises as written. However, the drum set role is constantly evolving so be flexible and prepared to play additional instruments.

SYNTHESIZERS

A piano background is strongly recommended. Knowing some pop and jazz theory would be an advantage for you. Learning and retaining on the fly is also a must for these positions. Tempo control and timing are extremely important. Be prepared to play on a semi-weighted synthesizer, not a piano.

*Guitar and bass is accepted on a year-to-year basis depending on the needs of the production.

AUXILIARY (RACK PERCUSSION)

If you are auditioning for an auxiliary percussion spot, you will need to be comfortable with a variety of percussion instruments (concert snare, toms, concert bass drum, cymbal effects, xylophone, bells, chimes, etc.). The aforementioned techniques will be used. Be able to read music, demonstrate musicianship, tempo control, and showmanship.

Rehearsal Supplies

There are a few things you **MUST** have at every rehearsal.

1. **Your music** - This seems obvious but we've all been there. All of your music, including the packet, needs to be in clear plastic sheet protectors in a 3 ring binder, no exceptions.
2. **Pencil** - The most important tool in any musician's arsenal. We will constantly be tweaking, refining, and reworking the show. It is vitally important that you meticulously notate these changes in your music. A pen is not recommended.
3. **Commitment to Excellence** -The excellence you strive for in rehearsal will be the excellence you achieve in performance.

CARE FOR THE EQUIPMENT

The instruments are to be treated with the finest care at all times. We are very fortunate to have the best equipment in the world all around us. We need to keep it that way! Nothing is **EVER** to be placed on top of the keyboards for any reason short of mallets, sticks, and of course the instrument covers. Instruments are to be covered at all times when they are not being played.

Use common sense and treat the gear as if it were your own...actually, treat it better than that! ***ABSOLUTELY NO FOOD OR DRINKS BY THE ELECTRONICS.*** Please keep/consume it somewhere else. The synth carts and instrument frames are not food storage containers or trash cans.

CARE FOR YOUR HEALTH

At no time should anyone play while hurt without the staff knowing. If you suspect a physical problem due to your playing, inform us immediately! We are not doctors, but if something can be done for you we will take care of it. If not, please understand that we need to avoid creating any lasting injuries such as tendonitis. The technique program is designed to avoid these problems. Much of the way it has been designed is based on personal experience and adjusting the technique so that one can play without pain or further injury.

Stick to the technique, work diligently to make adjustments to perfect the approach, and you'll greatly reduce the potential for injury.

CARE FOR THE GROUP

Many aspects of this activity go far beyond playing. How well you work with the group, how well you interact with others from different backgrounds, different ability levels, different ages, and different experience levels are much more valuable than just your ability to play an instrument. We are all in this together and you have to take care of each other no matter what. Being able to get along not only helps the ensemble grow, but also creates a positive vibe during rehearsal and an environment where your performance can be genuine. Play together and play for each other. Part of your audition will include your ability to become part of the group and bring others into the group.

FUNdamentals.

Thor
FZS 23.

A $\text{♩} = 80$
Shift to next note on count 3.

B Legatto.

C KEEP YOUR GRACE NOTES DOWN!!

D 1 E + A

E L R L R

Float Down
and set by count 3.